

HELENA WOODCOCK | ABOUT PR



A challenging role...

In a first of a series of pieces on the value of utilising good public relations professionals to help grow your business, **Helena Woodcock**, chief executive of Golf Communications International, examines the importance of what should be a relationship of great trust between client and professional.

PR or Public Relations can mean different things to different people. Many people associate it with the black arts of spin and Machiavellian political manoeuvring. Some confuse it with marketing and, even less accurately, with advertising. In the current economic climate the level of understanding of PR and the role of the PR professional seems to have diminished even further as it finds itself parked alongside the other “luxury” items in the company budget which have to be shelved until things improve.

So what is PR and what can it really achieve for your business? The most recent definition from the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) states that “Public Relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organisations and their publics.” Leaving aside the inelegance of the latter part of that statement, the key words are “communication” and “relationships”. PR is about building relationships with people, usually in the media, that can influence your clients and then through them telling your clients why you are special and why they should buy your product or service. Note that the words “advertising” and “sales” do not appear in the definition. I will come back to that later.

Whatever line of business you are in, understanding your clients and knowing as much as possible about them is vital. When you hire a PR professional you have to realise that you are essentially employing a communication (that word again) specialist who will become the voice of your company talking to your clients. This may be done directly through texts on your website, your marketing materials or publications, social media channels or indirectly through news releases or articles placed in the media. The responsibility of the PR professional is to deliver a clear and engaging message to your clients and to maintain relationships with the key media that can influence them. This communication process is of critical importance to your business. Your PR voice must keep your clients well informed about your products or services, interested, engaged and receptive to your message.

These days the media is changing rapidly and methods of communicating with clients are changing all the time. People expect businesses to reach out to them in a way that they appreciate but do not find intrusive or repetitive. The good

old days of building a website, uploading it to the internet and sitting back expecting people to find you are long gone. These days communication is about interaction and engagement with clients, it is about taking your message to them. The value of an effective PR professional is to be able to identify the most effective means of doing that and to maintain the relationships (stop me if I’m boring you!) with target media that enable you to get that message across.

Where does that sit with marketing and advertising? Well the answer is that in an ideal world it should be somewhere alongside them as part of the “process”. PR should complement marketing and to achieve the most impact it definitely should not be an “either or” situation. In a golfing context, you will find it very difficult to sell your course to someone if they have never heard of it and don’t have some affinity with it. You could spend a great deal of money advertising the course but

again the impact will be minimal if people don’t know anything about it other than the pretty image of the 15th green in the advert. If, however, people have seen it on TV or read some print

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or online articles about the course telling them who designed it and what the main features are, what the reaction has been from golf commentators or journalists who have played it and if it has been recognised with industry awards then they are much more likely to be receptive to the messages from your marketing activity and advertising.

Even when times are tough and budgets are being squeezed you still need to keep that virtuous circle in operation. If elements of it are dropped then the effectiveness of your entire promotional strategy will decrease accordingly. It will weaken your sales effort meaning lower revenues and, in turn, create more pressure on budgets. It is important to understand that PR is not an unnecessary cost but a good investment. Raising awareness of your product and building its profile through consistent communication through the right channels and maintaining valuable relationships with the media is something no business, particularly in golf, can ignore. **GBD**

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